

Voicing the Voiceless: Representing Marginality in Afghan Women's Testimonies

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Abstract

The paper intends to examine testimonial narratives by women in Afghanistan in the contemporary context. The study has chosen two life narratives, *Zoya's Story* and *My Forbidden Face* as representative texts. The paper argues that women in Afghanistan utilize narration as a significant strategy of resistance against the forces that deny the basic human rights to them. It further examines how the select testimonial narratives represent the women in Afghanistan who are denied the voice to assert their rights. The paper also has its focus on the project of empathetic unsettlement undertaken by the testimonial narratives. Narration is utilized as a significant strategy to arouse discourses against human rights violations in Afghanistan. The paper examines the impact that the act of testimonial narration has upon the narrator (author/informant) and the listener/readers who become secondary witnesses to the accounts of trauma. The paper also establishes that the narratives by women in Afghanistan declare solidarity with the struggles for justice and also set models for women to fight for their rights.

Keywords: Equality; Human Rights violation; Justice; Representation; Secondary witnessing; Testimonio-narration; Unsettlement; Resistance.

Introduction

The contemporary era which has witnessed numerous instances of violence against humanity has inspired a proliferation of writings from the margins. Testimonio is one of the most prominent genres adopted by the marginalized to document their experiences. As observed by Ellie Wiessel, "If the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle, and the Renaissance the sonnet, our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony" (Felman 6). Testimonio narratives are factually insisted narratives

that document the real-life experiences of people who have undergone experiences of trauma and human rights violations. They are marked by the urgency to communicate a problem of poverty, subordination, and human rights violations. Testimonio narratives are significant in the representation of marginal voices which lack agency of representation.

The present paper intends to examine testimonio narratives by women in Afghanistan who are the worst victims of one of the most significant human rights catastrophes in the contemporary age. Women in Afghanistan have been victims of social oppression and marginalization since ages. The political instability of the nation has had a heavy toll on the lives of the women in the country. The recent resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan has once again turned all heads to the Afghan humanitarian crisis. Despite the promises of peace and security assured by the Taliban and its assertion that it is committed to the safety and integrity of women in Afghanistan, the recent notifications and declarations made by the Taliban reveal that the new regime once again compromises the freedom and human rights of women in Afghanistan. The self-represented writings by women in Afghanistan are particularly significant in this context.

Even when victimized by manifold forms of oppression, women in Afghanistan relied upon writing as a significant means of self-representation and resistance. As recommended by Helen Cixous, "Women must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing... Women must put herself into the text- as into the world into history- by her own movement" ("Laugh of Medusa" 87).

The progressive forces within the nation of Afghanistan made significant attempts to encourage literary expressions of women in Afghanistan. The first women's magazine *Ishradul Naswan* was published in 1921 under King Amanullah Khan. The progressive attempts of the rulers to empower women were met with incessant criticism from the traditional people and organizations. The ascendance of power under the fundamentalist forces resulted in heavy setback to the rights of women. This had its reflection in the literary expressions of women too. Women voices in Afghanistan were silenced due to years of war and violence. Death threats and censorship by the fundamentalist forces prevented women from expressing themselves. Women's access to literary manifestations was conceived to be heinous crimes by the fundamentalist regimes. This limited the literary productivity of women in Afghanistan.

Despite the heavy restrictions imposed upon them, contemporary wom-

en in Afghanistan have made crucial attempts to express themselves. Afghan Women's Writing project is such an initiative to encourage women to open up about their experiences. It encourages women in Afghanistan to share their stories, poems, and essays that talk about their experiences of torture. The only available versions of the women experiences were through mediations by men and media which lacked the authenticity of self-represented writings. The inevitable necessity of self-represented accounts by women inspired the evolution of the mission. The mission of the organization is to encourage women with the belief that, 'To tell one's story is a human right'. The Non-profit organization named 'Free Women Writers' was launched by women in Afghanistan with an intention to give voice to the struggles of women in Afghanistan. This organization defines itself as "a registered, non-profit, non-partisan and all volunteer organization composed of writers, students and activists, based in Afghanistan and the diaspora who work for a more equal and just Afghanistan". The organization aims to improve the lives of Afghan women through advocacy, story-telling and education. As observed by Nurjahan Akbar, the founder of the organization, unless Afghan women start seeing themselves as independent humans with human rights, a shift in mentality and gender equality will be unlikely.

The women in Afghanistan have taken pains to express themselves through various genres of literature despite the strict surveillance upon them. Afghan women's poetry poignantly expresses the pain and suffering that they experienced under fundamentalist regimes. The genres of short story and novel have been employed by the writers from Afghanistan to give voice to the plight of people in Afghanistan through literary manifestations. The diaspora of Afghanistan has also significantly contributed to the literary representations of the Afghan conundrum. The fictional representations of authors like Khalid Hosseini, Nadia Hashimi, Homeria Qaderi, and Atia Abawi have contributed significantly in representing the nation and its crisis through fictional narratives.

The post-Taliban era following the fall of the Taliban in 2001 witnessed a proliferation of life narratives by the women in Afghanistan. Being authentic expressions of self, life narratives are significant in expressing the realities of women from their own perspectives. Some of the significant contributions include, *The Story of my Life: An Afghan Girl on the Other Side of the Sky* (2005) by Farah Ahmedi, *A Bed of Red Flowers: In Search of My Afghanistan* by Nelofer Pazira, *Dear Zari: The Secret Lives of Women of Afghanistan* (2011) by Zarguna Kargar etc.

The present paper examines the self-representation of women in Afghanistan with reference to two testimonio narratives. The narratives selected for the study are *Zoya's Story* by Zoya and *My Forbidden Face* by Latifa. The select testimonios unveil the harsh realities of women in Afghanistan and gives voice to the millions of women who are denied the agency to voice their troubles. The paper examines the testimonial value of these narratives as representative texts that address the voice of the voiceless. The paper also attempts to analyse how these texts infuse empathetic unsettlement among secondary witnesses and influence collective resistance against patriarchy and fundamentalism.

Zoya's Story: An Afghan Woman's Struggle for Independence is a poignant account of the tormented lives of Afghan women by Zoya, a women's right activist who works for RAWA, Revolutionary Association of Women in Afghanistan. This testimonial account charts Zoya's tormented childhood in Afghanistan, her adolescence spent in exile in Pakistan and her evolution as a woman who fights against fundamentalism in Afghanistan. Zoya's parents, who were clandestine activists against fundamentalism were killed by the Mujahideen fighters. Zoya was forced to go in exile to Pakistan where she got enrolled in secret school established by Revolutionary Association of Women in Afghanistan. Education received at the schools run by RAWA empowered her and encouraged her to become a full-time activist of RAWA which constantly works for the liberation and empowerment of women in Afghanistan. The testimonio also documents Zoya's visits to Kabul as a part of her mission in RAWA and her experiences during her exile in Pakistan. The horrible experiences that Zoya encountered in Afghanistan bear witness to the experiences of trauma and violence suffered by the people of Afghanistan during the initial regime of the Taliban.

My Forbidden Face written by Latifa in collaboration with Checkeha Hachemi recounts the trauma of growing up under the Taliban regime. Latifa recounts how the Taliban restricted the basic freedoms of life for the people of Afghanistan. She was sixteen when the Taliban occupied Kabul in 1996. Her family which was at once religious and liberal encouraged her to get educated. She aspired to become a journalist. However, the onslaught of the Taliban crushed her aspirations. It was declared by the Taliban that the country would be ruled according to the principles of Islam. According to Latifa's father, they preached Jihadi, but a Muslim doesn't kill another Muslim. Nowhere in Koran is it written that we should take life" (Latifa 113). Latifa was forced to confine herself in her room. She stared at her valued possessions – her books, clothes, photos, videos, mu-

sic, and cosmetics and so on. The testimonio documents the predicament of an ambitious woman who was forced to bury her dreams of education and career. Latifa was provided an opportunity to visit Paris and testify to the experiences of the people in Afghanistan. Inspired by her parents and friends, Latifa decided to take up the risk of testifying against the Taliban. Latifa was able to win great support from the human rights activists in Paris. The public protests and the empathetic tears of the journalists at Elle Magazine inspired Latifa in her ambassadorial mission. However, Latifa had to face serious consequences following this. Taliban imposed a Fatwa against her family and they were forbidden from returning to their native place. Thus, Latifa's testimonio recollects the experiences of a family which was struck in a strange land where they didn't even know the language. The testimonio ends with Latifa's hope that through constant attempts of the citizens and international community, the country of Afghanistan will enjoy peace and security one day. She clings on to the hope that they are not alone. She hopes to have the support of the Afghan community, the Afghan embassy, and journalist friends who may help them to rebuild their lives.

Having stated a brief outline of the select testimonios, the following section intends to analyse the self-representative nature of these testimonio narratives.

Representative nature of Afghan Women's testimonios.

Testimonio narratives are significant for their representative nature. As observed by Pramod K Nayar, testimonio represents "the voice of one who witnesses for the sake of an 'other' who remains voiceless. That is, the speaking subaltern subject of the narrative gives voice to the lived experience of herself and of those who are victims of social and linguistic-literary marginalization" (Nayar 3). The proliferation of marginalized narratives results from the need to tell and re-tell the experiences of trauma and oppression which are often neglected by the mainstream narratives. In his account of the autobiographical narratives by black prisoners, H Bruce Franklin observes, "People who have become artists because of their imprisonment tend to write in an autobiographical mode. The reason is obvious. It is their own personal experience that has given them both the main message and the motive to communicate it. The works of today's prisoners though predominantly autobiographical are rarely intended as display of individual genius. Whereas literary criteria dominant on campus exalt what is extra-ordinary or even unique with 'originality' as the key criterion. Most current autobiographical writings from prison intend

to show the readers that the author's individual experience is not unique or even extraordinary (Franklin 62).

An examination of the testimonio narratives by women in Afghanistan reveals the representative nature of these narratives. *Zoya's story* begins with a dedication that reads "to the women in Afghanistan, victims of inhuman suffering, inflicted by fundamentalism". This paratextual strategy reveals Zoya's intention to be a representative voice for the women in Afghanistan who are denied a voice to speak for themselves.

Zoya's story documents the experiences of a generation which went through experiences of torture and human rights violations throughout the different phases of political instability in Afghanistan. She represents the millions of Afghan children who were orphaned by wars and constant attacks by the fundamentalist organizations. The murder of her parents by the Mujahideen fighters indicates how resistance was repressed by the anti-democratic forces in Afghanistan. Frequent terror attacks in Afghan schools prevented many parents from sending their children to regular schools. Zoya's parents decided to provide informal education to her as they were concerned about her safety. Thus, Zoya represents the generation of Afghan children who were denied the privilege of formal education. For majority of the lower-middle class children in Afghanistan, education of any kind was a distant dream.

Zoya narrates the humiliating experiences that the people of Afghanistan had to undergo during their exile in different parts of the world. As a part of her work, Zoya visited many refugee camps in Pakistan where she witnessed the helplessness of the refugee population. They often lived in unhygienic conditions which made them vulnerable to diseases. They faced severe discrimination from the original inhabitants. Zoya represents a minute section of the Afghan community who were able to bear the fruits of empowerment. She was able to come out of a traumatic childhood and establish herself as a women rights activist. It is evident that her progressive upbringing had a crucial role to play in her empowered evolution. Unlike the other women who remain victimized under the oppressive forces, Zoya was able to empower herself through the education that she received from RAWA. Zoya utilizes her empowered status to give voice to millions of women in Afghanistan who lack voice to represent themselves.

My Forbidden Face is an endeavour by Elle Magazine and a French association to organise an information campaign in solidarity with the citizens

of Afghanistan. Latifa expresses hope that her testimonial narrative will serve as a key for other women, whose speech has been padlocked and who have buried their testimony in their hearts or their memoirs (*My Forbidden Face* 1). She dedicates her book to the “Afghan girls and women who have kept their dignity until their last breath; to those women who have been deprived of their rights in their country and who live in obscurity, even though we are in the twenty first century, to all those executed in public, without trial and without pity and under the eyes of their children and loved ones” (*My Forbidden Face* 1). Latifa represents the crushed aspirations of the youth in Afghanistan who were forced to give up their academic and career aspirations following the arrival of the Taliban. The future of the nation is in the hands of its youth. The inability to access quality education and employment opportunities has curtailed the future of the young population in Afghanistan. The opportunity given to Latifa to speak about the struggles of Afghan women provided wider visibility to the predicament of Afghan women.

Latifa’s testimonio represents the plight of women who were denied the opportunity to practise their career despite being highly educated. Her mother was a woman who enjoyed all the privileges of being an empowered woman. Being trained in gynaecology, she never ceased to practice her career despite having four children. The arrival of the Taliban put an end to her career aspirations. Through her testimonio Latifa represents many such women who were denied the opportunity to practise their careers.

It is significant to note that the authors of the select testimonio narratives keep their identities anonymous. The use of pseudonyms also points at the precariousness of their existence amidst turbulent political scenarios. Their public articulation against the regime made them further vulnerable to attacks from the fundamentalist forces. Being constantly under the threat of fundamentalists, many of them felt insecure to reveal their identities.

The use of pseudonyms also points at the irrelevance of nominal identity in the testimonial texts. The authors of these narratives are representatives of a community which underwent experiences of torture. Thus, these are not merely the stories of single individuals, but, represent the life of a community as a whole. Hence the narrators are prototypes of victims who underwent inhuman sufferings.

Narrator and the act of narrative testimony.

Re-telling experiences of torture is an act that helps the survivors to relieve themselves from the pain of torture. Suzette A Henke terms this as 'scripto-therapy', a recommended strategy to relieve the victims from the pain of torture. The select narratives use narration as a strategy to denounce torture publicly. These narratives also proclaim solidarity with the fellow victims who had undergone similar experiences of torture. Paradoxically, it is also observed that the act of narrating traumatic experiences involves relief and re-traumatisation at the same time. Judith Lewis observes that "The conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialect of psychological trauma".

It may be said that oppression is fundamentally based on de-humanisation. Oppressive structures deny humanity to the oppressed and normalise the process of oppression through systematic dehumanisation. Often, the victims are convinced of their infra-human status and are made to believe that their experiences are non-communicable. Muting the victims is one of the significant mechanisms of systematic oppression. Self-representative writings from the marginalised become significant in this context. Self-represented writings effectively resist the oppressor's attempt to mute the victims and thereby play fundamental role in the process of re-humanisation. Writing about self-experiences is seen to be a significant act of resistance which is fundamental in the process of re-humanisation.

The narrators of the select testimonios Zoya and Latifa **respectively decide to testify to the** struggles that they underwent because it is significant to speak out to the world about the atrocities the Afghan community endured. They utilise narration as a significant strategy to create public opinion against the intense human rights violations that take place in the country. While the testimonio accounts depict the accomplishment of being able to speak against the oppressor, they also reveal the pain of memory.

Zoya is often taken away by emotions when she recollects the horrible incidents of trauma that her fellow beings underwent. There are many incidents of graphic violence cited in the text that reveals the ultimate brutality imposed upon the people by the Taliban. Zoya recollects an incident in which the Taliban attacked a pregnant lady and forcefully made her deliver the baby in the streets. "At the gunpoint they forced her out of the taxi. They told her that they had never seen a foetus inside a womb before and wanted to know what it looked like. Then they raped her. Her

body, with the stomach split open, was not found until a few days after she died" (*Zoya's story* 48). This incident reveals the intensity of brutality imposed upon the Afghan citizens by the Taliban. The Mujahideen invented a new form of killing called "the Dance of the Dead body" According to this, the soldiers would brandish a sharp knife, and cut the victim's head. Then they poured boiling oil on the neck to stop the blood flowing and let the body drop to the ground, where it would shake all over. Zoya undergoes experiences of re-traumatisation as she recollects these instances of brutal violence unleashed upon the people. Despite having to bear the embarrassment of recollecting the experiences of torture, Zoya realises that it is significant to let the world know about the terrible experiences of torture endured by the Afghan citizens.

Latifa's initial hesitation to represent the Afghan community in Paris reveals her insecurity to travel abroad and speak about her experiences of torture. The constant scourge of terror under the Taliban held her back from speaking out. However, the persuasion of her friends and relatives inspired her in her testimonial act. Being an informed citizen, she realised her responsibility to work for the rights of women in Afghanistan and she decided to take up the challenge.

Latifa and her associates felt that it was important for the world to know that female medics are condemned to stay at home and could do nothing for the sick. As revealed by Latifa, "While the men talked politics, Mother, Diba and I could only speak of women, the oppressed who lived without voice or rights, designated victims of systematic purification. Never again to work, to learn, to be seen. To be widows or beggars in our country where men have been decimated by twenty years of war, are dead or handicapped or in exile, and have no more arms to oppose the Taliban" (Latifa 171). Being women who were oppressed from various realms, their primary concern was to speak up for the women who were the worst victims of fundamentalism.

Traumatic experiences create a permanent rupture in the psyche of the individual. As testified by Diana Ortiz, a member of TASSC's global community of survivors, Memories of torture will remain with them forever. One never heals from torture. Torture's ghost will constantly dwell among the survivors. Many of them will learn to live with the memories, the flashbacks, and the aftermath. However, the broken bonds will mend, pulled teeth will be replaced, scars will fade and many of them will return to a comparatively normal life" (*Witnessing Torture* 240). Thus, narrating traumatic experiences is an effective way to come to terms with the inhu-

man torture that the survivors of trauma had to suffer under a repressive regime.

The ever lasting impact of experiencing and witnessing traumatic experiences is evident in both the testimonies. Zoya reveals the mental trauma experienced by her following the murder of her parents. She wasn't able to mingle with others for many weeks. The incidents of torture that she witnessed in Afghanistan haunted her continuously. Latifa was taken away by depression following the onslaught of the Taliban. She could not accept the reality that aspirations were at stake. She recounts that they were struck at home and the apartment resembled a prison. Silence weighed heavily on all of them. Latifa 's mother underwent a mental breakdown after witnessing numerous instances of violence.

It is significant for the victims to speak about the experiences of torture as it provide them an opportunity to raise their voices against the cruelties imposed upon them by the oppressor. The survivors of traumatic experiences share their story with a hope that their voices will be heard, and their stories of torture would be understood by the people across the globe. This enables the world community to see torture for what it is.

Having examined the impact that narrative testimony creates upon the narrator, the following section intends to examine the impact that the testimonio narratives have upon the listeners who become the secondary witnesses to the accounts of trauma.

Secondary Witnessing and the project of empathetic unsettlement in the select Testimonios.

It is evident from the select testimonio narratives that these narratives sprang up from the need of disseminating traumatic experiences among a larger community of readers. The presence of an empathetic listener or an addressable other is essential to narrate a traumatic testimony. "Bearing witness to a trauma is, in fact a process that includes the listener. For the testimonial process to take place, there needs to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence of an other -in the position of the one who hears. Testimonies are not monologues. They cannot take place in solitude. The witness is talking to somebody" (Fellman 70-71). As suggested by Soshanna Fellman, the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event by extension.

The select testimonio narratives acknowledge the inevitable need to ad-

dress the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. There was a proliferation of self-represented writings immediately after the withdrawal of the Taliban in 2011. This reveals that the women in Afghanistan felt the immediate need to speak in public about their predicaments after years of fear-induced silence.

As observed by Dori Laub, in every survivor, there is an imperative need to speak about the trauma that they endured. The need to retell their stories of suffering is one of the significant reasons that persuade them to survive despite difficult circumstances. This springs from the need to let the world know about the violations that they had to endure as humans and to remind the world about the inevitable interventions into similar human rights violations that take place across the globe. Thus, the revelation of traumatic experiences also aims at the larger good of the vulnerable population.

The narration of the traumatic experiences creates a huge impact on the readers who become secondary witnesses to the accounts of trauma narrated. The impact that the narration of a traumatic experience creates upon the secondary witnesses is termed as 'empathetic unsettlement' by Dominic Lacapra. Lacapra observes, "It is dubious to identify with the victim to the point of making oneself a surrogate victim who has a right to the victim's voice or subject position. The role of empathy and empathetic unsettlement ... involves a kind of virtual experience through which one puts oneself in other's position and hence not taking the other's place" (La Capra 78). Thus, empathetic unsettlement involves the process of placing oneself in the subject position of the victim.

Bearing secondary witness to narratives on trauma presupposes the ethical responsibility of bearing witness. Unlike the primary witnesses who have experienced torture at first-hand, the secondary witnesses "must rely on their cognitive, affective and imaginative faculties to move beyond their position of unknowing" (*Witnessing Torture* 185). As argued by Kelly Oliver, "witnessing does not simply offer a report, nor does a witness simply seek acknowledgement, rather, witnessing goes beyond recognition to initiate an intersubjective relationship with ethical potential" (85). Thus, witnessing is a necessary component of any ethical response to torture.

The select narratives are the result of the collaborative efforts of the informants (narrators) and the interlocutors who have contributed to the transcription and publication of these narratives. The accounts of interlocutors in the postscripts and prefaces of these works acknowledge the

impact that these narratives had upon them as secondary witnesses to the traumatic experiences narrated by the informants.

John Follian and Rita Christofari, the interlocutors of *Zoya's Story: An Afghan Woman's Struggle for Freedom* recalls how they were able to identify with the hopes of Zoya who wanted to "teach women to read and write in a country where most of them were illiterate, to treat sick women in a country where the authorities decreed that they should die rather than be treated by male doctors, to speak of justice and democracy in a country where the only law was that of an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" (Zoya 234). As they listened to her story, they were transported into her world. They felt 'the claustrophobia of the burqa', heard the "Taliban's whip whistling through the air" and "saw the tears of mothers who had lost their sons" (*Zoya's Story* 235).

As seen in Latifa's testimonio, Latifa and her associates visited significant people in France and spoke about the plight of Afghan citizens who lived under the shadow of fear. The act of Latifa was instrumental in initiating social action against the human rights violations in Afghanistan. She was able to win the solidarity of French citizens in the fight of Afghan women to reclaim their rights.

Latifa was contented to see that many French citizens protested along the streets in support of the Afghan citizens. The tears of empathy manifested the impact that Latifa's testimony had upon the people of France. As her father assured her, the testimony that Latifa made had not gone in vain. She was able to enlighten the people about what the Taliban imposed on the citizens of Afghanistan.

The accounts of the interlocutors reveal the empathetic unsettlement created by listening to the traumatic experiences revealed by the informants. As secondary witnesses, the interlocutors and the readers partake in the traumatic experiences of the informants. This provides wider visibility to their experiences of torture and invites significant interventions into their humanitarian crisis.

Afghan Women's testimonios as narratives of resistance.

Women in Afghanistan like Zoya and Latifa utilize narration as a significant strategy to resist fundamentalism. It is notable that unlike the women who have no other option than to yield to the oppressive ideologies imposed upon them, Zoya and Latifa are able to resist the shackles of funda-

mentalism and express themselves. The progressive education that they received and the progressive nature of their parents enabled them to empower themselves to raise their voices against the fundamentalist forces. Their voices bear witness to the atrocities committed against their fellow beings. As observed earlier, both of them utilise narration as a significant means of self-representation and resistance against patriarchal and fundamentalist forces. They utilise their empowered status to lift other women who lack agency to speak for themselves.

The testimonial narratives by women in Afghanistan can be placed in the tradition of 'resistance Literatures'. Resistance Literatures have always inspired political movements against fascist regimes. Ghassan Kanaffani observes, "If resistance springs from the barrel of a gun, the gun itself issues from the desire for liberation and that desire for liberation is nothing but the natural, logical and necessary product of resistance in its broadest sense: as a refusal and as a firm grasp of roots and situations" (Harlow 11). As observed by Barbara Harlowe, "Resistance literature calls attention to itself, and to literature in general, as a political and politicised activity. The literature of resistance sees itself furthermore as immediately and directly involved in a struggle against ascendant or dominant forms of ideological and cultural production" (Harlow 29).

It is particularly significant that the select narratives are written by women who are the worst victims of oppression. Living under a regime that restricts the basic freedoms of life, writing against the regime itself is a monumental act of resistance. As observed by Nancy Saporita Sternbach, "Women's participation in revolutionary struggles witnessing murders of loved ones, sufferings, disappearances, rapes, tortures and most poignantly, women's specific resistance to military rule all attest to their own condition... which propels them to ensure that their story is heard, written and read" (Sternbach 96).

The selected narratives express strong resistance against the patriarchal leanings of the society. Latifa and Zoya express their discontentment with patriarchal stereotypes and resist it in their daily life. Zoya and Latifa reasserts that the original values of Islam do not segregate humans on the basis of gender. They condemn the fundamentalist manipulations of religious principles which aimed to legitimise the subordination of womanhood.

Zoya openly reveals her clandestine activities of resistance against the Taliban through the testimonio, *Zoya's Story*. She feels happy about the effort

that she puts through her ambassadorial mission to work for her people and enlighten the international community about the problems of Afghan citizens. Before leaving Afghanistan, she was desperately hopeless about the future of Afghan citizens. She was worried that being devastated by the struggles against the Soviet occupation, the people in Afghanistan lacked the strength to encounter the fundamentalist forces.

However, her education at the schools of RAWA empowered her. Being a member of RAWA, Zoya employed writing as a significant means of resistance. She inspired her compatriots to write for RAWA's publication even during their teenage. She started her activism with RAWA by writing articles on Afghan events for *Payam-e-Zan (Women's Message)*. Writing was employed as significant means to enlighten the ignorant and backward people and enable them to resist fundamentalism. She was inspired by the poetic works of Meena, the founder of RAWA who instilled the spirit of resistance among the women of Afghanistan. Despite the potential struggles before her, Zoya is determined to fight for the rights of her people. She dedicates the testimonio to the women in Afghanistan, who are victims of inhuman suffering inflicted by fundamentalism.

Latifa also confesses the clandestine activities undertaken by her in order to defy the patriarchal norms of the Taliban. She provided clandestine classes to the girls who were denied the right of education. She also reveals that her mother continued to provide clandestine medical services to the women in need. Her decision to speak about the predicament of women to international audience, despite the evident threats from the Taliban manifest her spirit of resistance.

The testimonio narratives by the women in Afghanistan defies the conventions set by patriarchy and Talibanism that denies the basic rights of life to women. Margorot Badran observes, "In a community that restricted women's visibility in public spaces, "public disclosure of a woman's own life was a far greater challenge to convention" (Badran 97). She further observes, "Much of the women's early practice of autobiography can be seen as a feminist act of self-assertion helping to shatter the complicity with patriarchal domination that has been affected through women's enforced invisibility and silence...A Woman, speaking about her own life constituted a form of shatter of shedding of the patriarchal surrogate voice" (Badran 97).

The women in the selected narratives utilize narration as a significant means to unmask the realities in Afghanistan and dispel patriarchy which

is evident in all institutional structures. It is notable that even amidst precarious situations they dared enough to speak for the rights of women. As observed by the editors/ compilers of *Zoya Story*, Zoya wanted to teach women in a country where the authorities decreed that they should die rather than being treated by male doctors. The acknowledgement of their clandestine activities against the regime is significant as it exhibits the audacity of the Afghan women despite being under precarious circumstances. Thus, these testimonio narratives attempt to re-write the history of Afghanistan from the perspective of women. This is a mighty act of resistance.

Element of Self-help in Afghan Women's testimonios.

It may be observed that the select testimonio narratives manifest strong elements of resilience and self-help. As observed by Carlos Alberto Aristevo, even after going through brutal experiences of torture, the victims of torture display significant spirit of resilience. Despite the enormity of pain inflicted by traumatic experiences, often individuals show great strength to come to terms with experiences of trauma and to reconstruct their lives. "The individuals do, however., possess a great strength, a capacity to fight against adversity, and an admirable ability to adapt. She adapts to the most difficult situations, endures the most atrocious pain and seeks desperately to relate to whomever she can..." (Witnessing Torture 14).

The Encyclopaedia of Women's autobiography observes that women's autobiographies possess an element of 'self-help' which demonstrates the movement from difficulty to perseverance and thus provides a model for others to follow. The testimonio narratives by women in Afghanistan stands up for the rights of women in Afghanistan. They serve as voices for the oppressed and intend to empower the fellow women to stand up for their heights.

It may be said that both Zoya and Latifa were women who took up the challenge to fight for the rights of women despite the precarious situations in which they lived. Their efforts to stand up for the rights of women despite precarious situations sets model for others to follow. The public confession of their resistance activities provides strength and ability to the fellow women to defy the restrictions imposed upon them and thus to dissent from the Taliban authority into their lives. These confessional narratives also provide wide visibility to the sufferings of women in Afghanistan and create discourses against the human right violations against women in Afghanistan. Thus, these narratives set models for the

women in Afghanistan which are worth following.

Zoya's story serves as an inspiration for the women traumatised by wars and violations. Her ability to reconstruct her life as an empowered women despite her traumatic childhood serves as an inspiration for the women in Afghanistan. She recollects how the members of RAWA inspired each other to continue their struggles for the rights of women in Afghanistan. Latifa's determination to travel to a foreign country testify to the struggles of women in her country is appreciable. She is an inspirational figure for the victimised women in Afghanistan who are denied opportunities of education and employment.

Conclusion

The study concludes that the women in Afghanistan are consciously taking significant efforts to reclaim a life of peace and dignity. Despite being restricted by manifold forms of oppression, their voices of resistance have significantly contributed to the empowerment of women in Afghanistan. The most significant part in emancipation of the marginalised is the realisation of exploitation. The women in Afghanistan have been taught to internalize their so-called subordinate status by the institutions of family and religion which have systematically socialised the children into a system that has internalised and propagated the subordinate status of women. The empowered women in Afghanistan have successfully enlightened their fellow women about the problematic nature of internalisation of the oppressive values and have enlightened them about the injustices that they are being subjected to every day.

This realisation of their victimization has positively contributed in their struggles against subordination by oppressive forces. As suggested by Bell Hooks, the realisation of margin as a space of radical resistance is an important step towards the emancipation of women. The attempts of the emancipatory movements and writings have enabled the women to realise the systematic oppression by structures of power. This has fuelled the anti- fundamentalist waves in Afghanistan.

The testimonio narratives have served as a window to the world outside in order to testify to the injustices that they are being subjected to every day. The women in Afghanistan have utilised this as a way to address the world around to enlighten them about the brutality that they are being subjected to. This is used as a means to infuse empathetic unsettlement among the readers who become secondary witnesses to their narratives

and to inspire human rights movements against the injustices suffered by them.

The testimonio is also used as a means to set examples for the women around them to empower themselves and to support the movements for reclamation of human rights in Afghanistan. It may be said that these narratives serve as a way of enlightening the fellow women in the realization of the infra-human status to which they are often pushed into. This realization strengthens their fights for justice and equality.

Madalaine Hron, Professor of English and Cultural studies, at Wilfred Laurier University (Canada), speaks about the significance of the representation of torture, in public discourse, social media, literature, and film. She believes that literature and culture can change the world. Her belief is based on her experience of witnessing the fall of the Berlin war and the end of apartheid in South Africa. The recent interest in human rights in humanities, manifested in publication of special journal editions of torture is a ray of hope in interventions into violations of human rights.

The essays and testimonials on torture which get distributed in Humanities class rooms bring new insights into academic research and the feelings they provoke will serve to bring about changes in the real world. Madalaine Hron observes that the inclusion of these kinds of writings in the mainstream curricula of humanities classrooms provides opportunity to prioritise human rights as a mainstream practice in the world today. Sidonie Smith and Kay Schaffers argue that "Personal narratives are often taken up within the international order of human rights and movements on behalf of social change (*Witnessing Torture* 215).

The study concludes that the personal narratives have a political function to perform. They play a major role in creating public opinion against the forms of oppression and have the potential to be used as primary tools in the human rights campaigns.

The life narratives by Afghan women have become increasingly relevant with the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan. The continuing testimony of the Afghan women about the manifold forms of oppression faced by women in Afghanistan declares solidarity with the struggles of Afghan women. It attempts to re-read the political history of Afghanistan from the point of view of the women. The hesitation of the world nations to accept the Taliban as the official administrative machinery in Afghanistan points at the spirit of resistance against the Talibanism among the world

nations. The rejection of the Taliban is based on the injustices committed by the militia upon the women in Afghanistan. The wider visibility of the Afghan humanitarian crisis through female self-representations has played a significant role in creating discourse against the regressive force of the Taliban.

It is a sign of hope that even in the precarious times, the women in Afghanistan haven't passively accepted oppression. The images of women who have taken to the streets with slogans of public protests following the resurgence of the Taliban manifest the vigour and spirit of resistance that they possess. Women from Afghanistan are widely using social media platforms to express dissent against the regime of the Taliban. The women from Afghanistan have filled the pages of Twitter and Instagram with images of Afghan women dressed up in colourful and gorgeous attires to cry out to the world that burqa is not the traditional dress of women in Afghanistan. The country of Afghanistan owes a colourful past where women were able to enjoy peace and serenity. They were not compelled to drape themselves in burqa and remain subservient. The propaganda of the Taliban about the tradition of Afghanistan based on the subordinate status of women is a myth that the Afghan women aim to dispel.

Thus, narration is used as an effective means of resistance by the women in Afghanistan who have undergone traumatic and oppressive experiences. Self-representation of women contributes greatly in creating 'empathetic unsettlement' among the readers and viewers who become secondary witnesses to the traumatic experiences. This creates discourse of resistance against human rights violations in Afghanistan.

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